

**MINUTES OF THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING**

April 8, 2011

Gee's Bend Ferry Terminal
Camden, AL

The Black Belt Commission Executive Committee met Friday, April 8, 2011 at Gee's Bend Ferry Terminal, Camden, Alabama, hosted by John Clyde Riggs and Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission. The following were in attendance:

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office
Senator Hank Sanders, Co-Chair
Margaret Bentley, Co-Chair
Mayor Sheldon Day, Co-Chair
Donald Mills, Chair, Small Business Committee
Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Cultural and Youth Committee
George Alford, Chair, Manufacturing Committee
Tyson Howard, Executive Director, South Central Alabama Development Commission
John Clyde Riggs, Director, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission
Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Council
Ginger Rue, Project Manager
Candy Capel, Project Manager
Thomas Moore, Project Manager
Emily Law, BBC Executive Director
Ross Gunnells, ARDO
Brian Watkins, A2D
Tony Shackleford, A2D
Yolanda Shackleford, A2D
Scott Muhammed, SEED Project
Erica Perry
Fannie Grantham
Marcellus Brooks

Sheldon Day chaired the meeting and welcomed everyone. **Margaret Bentley** made opening remarks regarding the commission still being around after 6+ years. She also commented on the project Sheldon landed in Thomasville just a quarter of a mile from Wilcox County that created 180 jobs. **Senator Sanders** commented on the continued high level of energy that exists with the Commission.

Sheldon recognized **Emily Law** who addressed the agenda item regarding a set date for the Black Belt meetings. It was decided meetings would be held the 2nd Friday of every other month. It was unanimously agreed upon with the stipulation that depending on the circumstances, dates could be changed.

She then introduced **Brian Watkins with A2D** who presented a slide presentation for A2D, the company implementing fiber for Broadband in the Black Belt and gave an

overview of the project and talked about the timeline for installation. (This presentation has been forwarded to each co-chair, committee chair and project managers.) The entire presentation is included as Attachment #1.

- The project monies received have to be used in un-served or underserved areas.
- Talked about the digital divide in America – People who -
 - Do not have access to broadband
 - Do not have home computer
 - Do not know how to use computer
 - Can't afford broadband service
- Discussed Broadband Impact –

About the project:

\$59 Million plus a \$27 Million match for a total of \$86 Million will be invested in an 8-county region that includes Dallas, Lowndes, Macon and Wilcox Counties.

Will enable free, community-funded internet services to un-served and underserved populations in the area's economically depressed counties.

Will enhance public safety services by creating an interoperable network between public safety agencies in all 8 counties, as well as establish the infrastructure necessary to support a future 700 MHz wireless interoperable public safety broadband network.

The South Central Alabama Broadband Commission also proposes to:

- Partner with several small disadvantaged businesses to construct over 2,200 miles of new fiber.
- Facilitate new or improved broadband service for up to 72,000 households and 3,000 businesses by enabling local internet service providers to utilize the project's open network at 45 points of interconnection.
- Provide direct connections to approximately 400 anchor institutions, including as many as 34 public safety entities, 91 K-12 schools, four libraries, five community colleges and two institutions of higher education, 16 healthcare facilities and 219 government buildings and centers.

John Clyde Riggs, Director, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission, reported There would be a meeting in Selma the following Wednesday, April 13, 10 a.m., at City Hall with Trillion Communications and A2D to answer any questions regarding broadband initiative in the area.

Scott Muhammed discussed the **SEED PROJEC**. Scott co-directs the Students for Education and Economics Development (SEED, Inc.) in Eutaw, Alabama with wife, Erica Henry.

- SEED operates an 8-week summer farm school for children and will be initiating a 16-week apprenticeship program matching adult apprentices with master farmers in Greene County, Alabama.
- There were 40 students in the program the 3rd year. Will have between 80 to 100 students this year. Eighteen and up want to come to classes.

- All the farmers are now 70 and 80, so this pilot program provides necessary assistance for them.
- Have donated seed for the program.
- Scott apprenticed with Marcellus Brooks, who also spoke, and Rev. James Bevel in Pembroke, Illinois, cultivating assorted vegetables on twenty acres of organic land.
- Marcellus Brooks apprenticed in Chicago in one of the worst neighborhoods there was. Talked about marketing produce grown by local farmers. Most produce is grown in the south. We have resources to grow right and labor, but we have to reconnect this region with the northern market. Stated their marketing plan respects being on time with supply.
- Carol Zippert stated the Federation of Farmers already had similar program in place.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE – John Zippert, Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, reported -

- Some of the Agriculture Committee members had an opportunity to visit two plants in Georgia where equipment similar to that proposed for the Black Belt Family Farm Fruit and Vegetable Market and Innovation Center (“Center”) has been installed.
- Reported a visit with an equipment vendor.
- Committee members from Tuskegee University are putting a trip together to California to look at other sites and vendors. This will be a small group that will include the architect. Number of participants will depend on cost of trip and available funds of each traveler.
- Group will look at equipment with solar capability and study ways to make this a more sustainable project.
- Committee is willing to look at equipment options outside the U. S.
- With respect to the actual site, a survey of the property is underway at the request of the architect.
- The size of the Center is now 12,000 to 15,000 square feet instead of the original 20,000 feet for cost purposes.
- Portions of the project may be phased in over time, but the educational capability of the Center will be retained.
- The Committee, along with a group of black Belt farmers, held a meeting with C. H. Robinson, a logistics and shipping firm that works with WalMart’s watermelon division.
- Tentative plans were made for tour of WalMart’s Opelika facility in April.
- It is the plan of the Committee to begin delivery of watermelons to the company with other produce to follow later.
- Next meeting of the Agriculture Committee is scheduled for April 25, 2011 with intent of reviewing architectural plans and equipment findings.

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE – Dr. David Hale, Chair, Ginger Rue, Project Manager, reported –

- Committee continues to work on Project LEARN to bring Entrepreneurship Training and Advising to displaced workers and vets in the Black Belt. The project was funded through June 2011 and has been extend to 2012.
- Committee will support the **BBC's Small Business Committee** in its **Small Business Summit** during National Small Business Week (May 16-20). The committee will provide a training workshop.
- Committee is working with Black Belt Treasures online as an e-commerce initiative. (<http://www.blackbelttreasures.com/>) A recommendation will be made next week to their Board of Directors for a new ecommerce system that will reduce costs significantly and provide an enhanced “in-store shopping experience” and improved store operations. Following the recommendation, a conversion roadmap will be developed and executed.
- The committee continues to work with Forza Financial, Alabama Microfinance Initiative, on initial starter loans for micro-businesses. Committee work includes an awareness campaign and attempts to provide a match-maker site for micro-enterprises to find purchasers of their products and services. The initial focus is on services needed b U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development within Alabama.
- The committee is aiding a project to provide critical location information to corporate decision makers concerning a new site selection.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - Felecia Jones, Chair, reported-

- In the process of restructuring committee.
- The **Assets for Independence Program** continues..
- Investment of \$50,000 was made by the BBCF and \$20,000 by the Greene Sumter Enterprise Community to launch the Black Belt IDA Initiative.
- Informational workshops have been conducted in Greene, Lowndes, Dallas, Sumter and Marengo counties to make the residents familiar with the program.
- A workshop is scheduled for April 21 for residents of Pickens County and on May 20th for residents of Choctaw County.
- As of April 8, 21 investors are enrolled in Marengo County, one in Sumter County and one in Pickens County.
- Working diligently to fill all available openings.

CULTURAL AND YOUTH – Carol Zippert, Chair, reported -

- The Cultural and Youth Committee continues its collaborative with the Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) and the Black Belt Community Foundation (BBCF).
- This collaborative has received a state grant of \$245,700 through the ASCA for the fiscal year 2010-2011 to support community arts projects and related activities in the 12 county Black Belt Region.
- The grant is administered through the Black Belt Community Foundation.

- There were 90 grant applications.
- Black Belt Community Foundation will announce award of grants May 21st. All twelve Black Belt counties are represented.
- The resources support a community arts coordinator based at the BBCF, community arts projects with a focus on youth, sponsors community arts workshops and continues to work on a database of artists and arts related organizations and activities based in the Black Belt region.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, reported-

- Committee meeting scheduled for April 18, 10 a.m. at Pie Lab in Greensboro
- Committee will discuss how to build on successful Dropout Prevention Seminar held in Montgomery--may continue next year or do a similar seminar.
- Also currently continuing to pursue a project to collect gently-used ACT and SAT prep materials from college students for distribution to Black Belt high school sophomores and juniors. A committee member who is a University of Alabama Fellow will spearhead this effort.
- Will work with Nisa Miranda with ACE program to distribute material.
- Continuing to seek funding to provide Black Belt scholarships to the University of Alabama Student Introduction to engineering summer program for rising juniors and seniors. Also currently working on a public relations piece for distribution to state media about how the program has positively impacted past Black Belt scholarship recipients to this program.

FAMILIES COMMITTEE – Dr. Lynn Boyd, Chair, reported:

- Current project is to distribute the summer jobs pamphlet for high school students. These should be ready for distribution by end of school year.
- The brochure will be distributed to Black Belt high schools and will give students advice on how to present themselves professionally and where to seek employment. Will work with Nisa Miranda to distribute.
- Also working on the Full Service Community Schools grant with Lowndes County Public Schools. Goal is to have elementary and/or secondary schools work with community-based organizations and other public or private entities to provide a coordinated and integrated set of academic, social, and health services that respond to the needs of students, their families and the community.
- Still working on Angel Food Project in Lowndes County.
- New project involves grant writing and expanding school services to provide mental health assistance. Make contact with student and family and offer support from elementary to high school to college.

HEALTH COMMITTEE — Chad Nichols, Co-Chair

- Chad spoke about his association with Sight Savers of America.
- Reported he had met with Congresswoman Terri Sewell and discussed priorities for the Health Committee.
- Gave update on the dialysis situation in Perry County. Promised to strengthen efforts with Frances Ford, Sowing Seeds of Hope.

- Discussed telemedicine. Stated Congresswoman Sewell wants to move forward with this topic.
- Discussed growing own physicians. He continues to work with Dr. John Wheat at the University of Alabama. Reported doctors locating in one of these areas brings in \$1 million a year.
- Talked about Sight Savers and Jeff Haddox and his early association with Jeff.
- Will continue to build on the Black Belt Eye Care Consortium.
- Talked about the Perry County Eye Care Clinic and the state vision program for every kindergarden, 2nd – 4th and 6th grade child. Provides all follow-up for kids.
- Help with insurance for people with limited ability to pay. Provider network to provide care – pay for or donate, pay for everything.
- 100 children in program – brings doctors from UAB School of Opthamology to identify need and treatment.
- KidCheck Program – Thanked Rural Development Office for supporting to move program to Sight Savers in order to get grant money.

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE – Bea Forniss, Chair, reported-

- Infrastructure means, water, sewer and paving roads.
- This year's focus is changing in that Governor Bentley's priority is job creation.
- We'll be working with ARC, DRA and Entrepreneurial programs and women-owned businesses to increase awareness and search for funding.
- Money will be tight for a while to come and we'll be writing grants at ADECA to add to those coming in.
- She would be attending the National Governor's Association this weekend in Washington with Delta Regional Authority.
- Funded one recaptured funds project in Demopolis for drainage for 250 homes. \$500,000 was awarded.
- Some projects are critical, but it has to be a legitimate project to be funded.
- We are going to work with Ron and look forward to being successful.

MANUFACTURING COMMITTEE – George Alford, Chair, reported-

- Thanked everyone for their prayers and concern over the past year.
- Reported everyone on the committee has been contacted.
- In the process of setting up a meeting to discuss priorities for his committee.
- Talked about Sheldon's ability to get jobs for the area and discussed regionalism and how these jobs will affect Wilcox County.

MARKETING & TOURISM –Pam Swanner, Chair –

- The Committee continues to work on the Black Belt Nature and Heritage Trail to gain federal designation.(See attached info sheet on the Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area-back and front)
- In her role as Director of Black Belt Adventures, the attached listing of goals, accomplishments and upcoming projects was submitted. (see attachment)

SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT – Dr. James Mitchell, Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, reported-

- No report was given.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE – Donald Mills, Chair, reported-

- Held its regularly scheduled conference call on Thursday, March 10 2011.
- Committee has been consistent with its meetings and alternating conference calls.
- Main project is the Procurement Conference for West Alabama in Thomasville on April 14, 2011, with Ron Sparks as the luncheon speaker.
- Reported registrations for the conference had been good; 67 individuals registered and deadline to register is Monday, April 11th.
- Committee welcomed new members Hathorn and Yolanda Wilson. Judge Tammy Montgomery of Sumter County has been invited to join the committee and is expected at the next meeting of the committee on April 12, 2011 at 10 a.m. at UWA.
- The committee has begun working on the next two events in May:
- National Small business Month/Week; and
- Youth Entrepreneurial Seminar Y.E.S. May 18, 2011 and the
- Small Business Workshop May 26, 2011 both to be held in Livingston.
- Brandi Gibson is working with Ginger Rue to come up with a focus for the first event and the target market.
- Looking at technology training as the focus for the event. Training in Excel, customer service training, and how to use internet in small businesses.
- Small Business Workshop was suggested to be a day-long event with concurrent sessions, lunch, and more concurrent sessions, addressing areas suggested.
- Draft will be presented at April 12th meeting at which time committee will discuss framework for both May events.
- Veronica Triplett will work with the committee on these events as well.

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE – Shirley Worthington, Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, -

- No report was provided.

REGIONAL COUNCIL REPORTS:

John Clyde Riggs, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission –

- Stated he had spent most of last two months on budget issues.
- Thanked Senator Sanders and Ron Sparks for their assistance with some issues they've encountered.
- Reported they would continue to do what they've been doing.

Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Regional Commission -

- Talked about Macon County and Exit 38 with Tuskegee, Tuskegee Airmen Museum, and Tuskegee University and how to entice people off the interstate. He mentioned he had discussed this at the last meeting also.

- Lowndes County trying to develop retail.
- Working with county on redistricting.

Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Planning – Talked about \$2,242,000 in grant activities in **Greene, Hale and Pickens Counties:**

- \$238,000 - **Greene County** Industrial Development Board project to develop a master plan for the crossroads of America Industrial Park.
- \$285,000 – **Greene County** Industrial Development Board to provide water and sewer infrastructure in Crossroads of America Industrial Park.
- \$50,000 – mapping water systems throughout **Greene County**
- \$12,000- Caution lights in **Boligee**.
- \$7,000 – Safe House Black History Museum in **Greensboro** educational enhancement project.
- \$234,000 - **Moundville** water tank upgrades
- \$240,000 - **Hale County** hospital computers
- \$119,000 - **HERO** Youth Build leadership project
- \$207,000 – Whatley Health Services, Inc. medical and dental equipment for new facility in **Greensboro**
- \$150,000 – Applied for Pre-K program (HIPPY) for **Hale County Board of Education**.
- \$255,000 – **Reform** Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrades
- \$25,000 – **Reform** Police Car Equipment
- \$400,000 – **Carrollton** Sewer Line rehabilitation
- \$20,000 – **Carrollton** Police Car Equipment

Ron Sparks made the comment that he continues to be excited to work with the Commission and he is constantly amazed at the good things that are happening. Stated we need to do more with our Alabama River ways.

Margaret commented on the outstanding reports.

Senator Sanders – the Black Belt Commission realized that in order to transform an area, we have to have a desire to stimulate interest and have to be willing to create partnerships.

The meeting adjourned at 12 Noon for a delicious lunch sponsored by John Clyde Riggs and the Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission.